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THE INFLUENCE OF THE PEABODY FUND ON EDUCATION IN RECONSTRUCTION FLORIDA

by F. BRUCE ROSEN*

THE PEABODY EDUCATION FUND had an important impact on education in Florida, particularly during the post-Civil War years from 1869 to 1876. Through its emphasis on elementary education, its assistance to urban schools, and its support of segregated schooling, the Peabody Fund helped determine future patterns of education in the state.

The fund received its official impetus in 1867 when George Foster Peabody, merchant, financier, and philanthropist, announced a gift of \$1,000,000 to be "held in trust, and the income thereof used and applied . . . for the promotion and encouragement of intellectual, moral, or industrial education among the young of the more destitute portions of the Southern and South-western States of our Union."¹ The trustees could allot up to forty per cent of the principal within two years of the fund's establishment.²

In June 1869, Peabody gave another \$1,000,000, all but \$875 in the form of securities, to the fund.³ Peabody intended that the income from these grants "be distributed among the entire population, without other distinctions than their needs and the opportunities of usefulness to them."⁴ In addition to the cash and securities, Peabody added two gifts of bonds issued by several southern states with a total face value of nearly \$1,500,000. It included Florida state bonds valued at \$384,000.⁵ When, however, General Henry R. Jackson visited Florida to arrange for a settlement, he was advised that "no acts of the Legislature, no decisions of courts, or of any tribunal, had affirmed the validity

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1. *Proceedings of the Trustees of the Peabody Education Fund*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1875-1881), I, 3. Hereinafter cited as *Proceedings*.
2. *Ibid.*, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 142-47.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 4, 146.

of the bonds; but the Territorial Council, the people, and the State had always denied their obligatoriness."⁶ As a result, the fund provided no aid to Florida from 1886 to 1892.⁷

Peabody personally selected the board of trustees, and named his close friend, Robert C. Winthrop, former congressman and United States Senator from Massachusetts, as chairman.⁸ One of Winthrop's main interests in his later years became the fund.⁹ In fact, the fund had been created in the first place as a result of Winthrop's conversations with Peabody in October 1866.¹⁰

While no Floridian served as a trustee during the Reconstruction era, four Southerners were on the board: William C. Rives of Virginia, William Aiken of South Carolina, William A. Graham of North Carolina, and Edward A. Bradford of Louisiana. Bradford never attended an annual meeting and resigned in February 1871.¹¹ General Richard Taylor of Louisiana, the only son of Zachary Taylor, twelfth president of the United States, filled Bradford's place.¹² The remaining three Southerners—all moderates who, despite their Confederate loyalties during the war, had originally opposed secession—played active roles as trustees.¹³ At the same 1871 meeting during which the board accepted Bradford's resignation and added Taylor, A. H. H. Stuart of Virginia was appointed, enlarging the southern contingent to five of the sixteen members. In 1875, when William A. Graham of North Carolina died, Henry R. Jackson of Savannah succeeded him.¹⁴

The fact that renowned Southerners were on the board and that Robert E. Lee, who met with George Peabody at White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, in August 1869, approved of the fund, undoubtedly allayed any fears that may have been felt

6. J. L. M. [Jabez Lamar Monroe] Curry, *A Brief Sketch of George Peabody and a History of the Peabody Education Fund Through Thirty Years* (Cambridge, 1898), 145.
7. *Ibid.*, 145-46.
8. *Proceedings*, I, 5.
9. Charles K. Bolton, "Robert Charles Winthrop," *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20 vols. (New York, 1928-1936), XX, 416-17.
10. *Proceedings*, II, 304.
11. *Ibid.*, I, 226-27, 232.
12. *Ibid.*, 274.
13. J. H. Easterly, "William Aiken," *Dictionary of American Biography*, I, 128-29; Frank Nash, "William Alexander Graham," *Dictionary of American Biography*, VII, 480-81; Thomas P. Abernethy, "William Cabell Rives," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XV, 635-37.
14. *Proceedings*, II, 54.

by Southerners regarding its purpose.¹⁵ The fund's general agent and the trustees opposed mixed schools, and the board agreed to leave that matter "entirely with the local authorities." It was agreed that "no portion of the fund can be expended on mixed schools except by the sanction of those authorities—a sanction which, so far as is known, has been uniformly withheld."¹⁶ From the beginning, it was clear the promotion of primary or common school education would be emphasized first.¹⁷ To this end, the Reverend Barnas Sears, president of Brown University, was appointed general agent, with the power to carry "out the designs of Mr. PEABODY in his great gift, under such resolutions and instructions as the board shall from time to time adopt."¹⁸ Before becoming a university president in 1855, Sears had served as secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education where he strengthened many of the reforms begun by his predecessor, Horace Mann.¹⁹ Described as a man of "administrative ability . . . imperturbable temper and genial personality," he was, however, not considered "an original thinker."²⁰

Eschewing the shotgun approach to the distribution of funds, and recognizing that the interest on \$2,000,000 would have to be used carefully if it was to have an impact on southern education, Sears supported aid for public schools "where large numbers can be gathered, and where a model system of schools can be organized."²¹ In his report of January 20, 1868, he called for the adoption of a comprehensive plan "for the general improvement of the schools," rather than "doling out charitable aid to all who are in want of the means of education."²²

Sears clearly reiterated this point of view when he responded to a letter from Florida Superintendant of Schools C.

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15. Franklin Parker, "George Peabody, 1795-1869: His Influence on Educational Philanthropy," *Peabody Journal of Education*, 49 (January 1972), 141-42.
 16. "Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Florida," January 1, 1871, p. 27, in *Florida Senate Journal*, 1871, Appendix.
 17. *Proceedings*, I, 16.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. Harris Elwood Starr, "Barnas Sears," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XVI, 537-38.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. *Proceedings*, I, 56.
 22. *Ibid.*, 39.

Thurston Chase, who was inquiring as to the availability of aid. Sears wrote: "Our policy is to aid and encourage free public schools in those towns which are central and influential. . . . We cannot give charitable aid to all the feeble rural districts; our Fund would be insufficient for that. The amount divided among so many would be very insignificant, hardly worth asking for."²³

The scale of grants established in 1870 gave eligible cities between \$300 and \$2,000. It was specified that at least 100 white children had to be aided if the community received any Peabody funds. This meant that black schools would be denied help unless their white counterparts, whose need was not quite as imperative, also received support. A white school with at least 100 pupils was eligible for \$300; 150 pupils, \$450; 200 pupils, \$600; 250 pupils, \$800; and 300 pupils, \$1,000. All institutions had to be graded, with a teacher furnished for every fifty pupils.²⁴ Sears justified the policy with the argument that in many of the cities receiving Peabody dollars, there were already black schools which had been established by the Freedmen's Bureau and various charitable aid societies. The fund, he felt, should direct its efforts toward the needs of the white population.²⁵

Sears apparently chose to ignore the appalling illiteracy among blacks, notwithstanding the existence of educational facilities that he mentioned. In Florida in 1870, 84.1 per cent of the black population ten years of age and over did not know how to read and write, as contrasted with 27.6 per cent of the comparable white population.²⁶ During the five year period, 1865-1870, among blacks ten to fourteen years of age—the group likely to be attending schools—illiteracy stood at 64.1 per cent, as compared to 37.6 per cent for whites.²⁷ The high percentage of illiterate young whites suggests that schooling became less readily available after the war than it had been in earlier years.

The emphasis on the education of blacks in Florida after the Civil War resulted in the reluctance of many white parents to send their children to the public schools. The 1870 census shows

23. *Ibid.*, 208.

24. *Ibid.*, 235-36.

25. *Ibid.*, 53-54, 91.

26. Charles Warren, *Illiteracy in the United States in 1870 and 1880* (Washington, 1884), 74.

27. *Ibid.*, 82.

at least fifty per cent of those whites attending school to be enrolled in private academies or similar institutions.²⁸

Sears's policy towards Florida and the other southern states encouraged white rather than black public education. Negro schools received only two-thirds as much aid as white schools of comparable enrollments. The fund rationalized such differential treatment on the grounds that Negro schools cost less to operate and maintain.²⁹ On September 21, 1869, Sears informed Robert Winthrop that, "It costs less to maintain schools for colored children than for the white. Some will find fault with our making any distinction between the two races."³⁰ Sears was also not a proponent of integrated schools. When the fund was criticized for its support of a white private school system in Louisiana, Sears argued: "If the law requires mixed schools, and the children, whether white or black, generally attend them, we shall have no difficulty in our work. But if the State supports only mixed schools, and the white children do not attend them, we should naturally aid, *not* the colored children who enjoy, exclusively, the benefit of the public school money, but *the white children who are left to grow up in ignorance*. If it be said that the white children ought to attend the mixed schools, and that it is their own fault, or that of their parents, if they do not, we reply that we are not called on to pronounce judgment on that subject."³¹

Sears's statement pleased most conservative Southerners. If white students refused to attend integrated schools, Sears practically guaranteed that the Peabody fund would, as it did in Louisiana, support a white private school system and would terminate its already meager support of education for black children.

The Florida school law of 1869 did not specifically require separate school systems. An attempt had been made in the previous session of the legislature to enact such a bill, but it had been defeated, largely through the efforts State Senator Charles H. Pearce of Leon County, "bishop" in the African Methodist Church, and chairman of the Senate committee on

28. U. S. Census Office, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Population*, I (Washington, 1872), 462.

29. Curry, *Brief Sketch*, 40.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 61.

education. Pearce announced that he would rather have no schools than a bill with such a proscription attached.³² But the fact is that there had never existed any "danger" of mixed schools in Florida since the 1869 law permitted county school boards to separate the races by allowing "grading and classifying [of] the pupils."³³ These boards could also establish "separate schools for the different classes in such manner as will secure the largest attendance of pupils, promote harmony and advancement of the school, when required by the patrons."³⁴ Should there have been any misunderstanding of the implications of this particular specification, the Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* hastened to explain "that with a Board composed of men who appreciate the importance of their position and are disposed to do what is right and proper, consulting the wishes and desires of the community, mixed schools . . . can be altogether avoided."³⁵

There is no evidence that any integrated schools operated in Florida under the school law of 1869, and it is largely due to the lack of effective external pressure on the state's racially conservative educational policies that a dual school system emerged during Reconstruction. Sears lobbied effectively against federal civil rights legislation that would have required mixed schools. He argued that if too great a pressure for integration was placed on the South, a private school system would result, and the nascent state school systems would be destroyed.³⁶

Insofar as he promulgated regulations which required white schools to be established first, provided lower funding for Negro schools, lobbied against mixed schools, and justified and tacitly supported segregated schools, Barnas Sears gave aid and comfort to the cause of a separate and unequal education for blacks in Florida and elsewhere. Sears's contention that the education of black children had been adequately provided for by the Freedmen's Bureau, charitable societies, and church groups, even if true, would still have been the case only in the earliest years after the Civil War. The Peabody fund's policy of differential

32. Dorothy Dodd, "'Bishop' Pearce and the Reconstruction of Leon County," *Apalachee*, II (1946), 8.

33. *Laws of Florida*, 1869, chapter 1686, section 19, p. 12.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 14, 1869.

36. *Proceedings*, I, 405; Barnas Sears, "Education," *Atlantic Monthly*, 34 (September 1874), 381-82.

support continued throughout the Reconstruction period. In the thirteen years from 1867 to 1880, while Sears was general agent for the fund, only six and one-half per cent of the \$1,200,000 distributed for education went to schools specifically designated for blacks.³⁷

Prior to the passage and implementation of the Florida school law of 1869, which laid the base for future educational legislation in the state and established the direction of education for the next century, Sears accurately described Florida as "very backward in education . . . [with] no schools in the rural districts."³⁸ The tenuous hold which public education had gained in Florida prior to the Civil War had been effectively destroyed by the conflict, and no legislative provision for the schooling of white children appeared until 1869. Education for blacks came from three sources working closely together: the Freedmen's Bureau, charitable and religious organizations, and the state. When the bureau drafted, and the state legislature passed, the "Act Concerning Schools for Freedmen" in 1866, Thomas W. Osborn, then assistant commissioner of the Florida Freedmen's Bureau, and later United States Senator from Florida, accurately described the legal status of education as "a thousand times better for the education of the blacks than for . . . [white] children."³⁹

In reporting to the trustees on his July 1868 tour of Florida, Sears pointed out that despite Jacksonville's status as "the most flourishing town in Florida . . . there were no schools [in Jacksonville] of any account. In all the peninsula south of St. Augustine, there is no school of importance except at Gainesville." In St. Augustine, Sears found "no education except that given by Catholic priests and nuns."⁴⁰ Apparently, Sears was ignoring the state's schools for blacks. In 1867 there existed thirty-four day schools, twenty-two night schools, and twenty-nine Sabbath schools officially reported as freedmen's schools. Fifteen "unofficial" freedmen's schools also existed.⁴¹ In 1868, thirty-three day,

37. Earle H. West, "The Peabody Education Fund and Negro Education, 1867-1880," *History of Education Quarterly*, 6 (Summer 1966), 4.

38. *Proceedings*, I, 104.

39. Osborn to O. O. Howard, January 19, 1866, "Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands," Record Group 105, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

40. *Proceedings*, I, 104-05.

41. U. S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, *Semi-Annual Report on Schools for Freedmen*, 10 vols. in 9 (Washington, 1866-1870), IV, 18.

twenty-one night, and twenty-three Sabbath schools for freedmen operated in Florida.⁴²

By 1870 Sears reported that as a result of the passage the previous year of the school law, Florida, despite inadequate funds, had "a very good system of public schools established by law."⁴³ Only after the passage of this 1869 law, and the improvement of educational opportunities for white children which followed, did the Peabody trustees begin to take an active role in providing educational support for Florida. From January 1, 1869, to December 31, 1876, the fund contributed a total of \$41,950. During this period, contributions showed a pattern either of holding steady or of increasing until the end of 1874, when a sharp decline in the amount allotted took place.⁴⁴

In 1869 the fund authorized \$1,850 to Florida; grants the next year totalled \$6,950. The fund distributed \$6,550 in 1871; \$6,200 in 1872; \$7,700 in 1873; and \$9,900 in 1874. The next year witnessed a reduction to \$1,800, and in 1876 a further drop to \$1,000 followed. The shrinkage in funds after 1874 did not affect only Florida, although between 1874 and 1876 Florida experienced the greatest reduction of any of the states receiving aid. The fund reduced grants from a high of \$137,150 in 1873 to a low of \$76,300 in 1876, a cut of approximately forty-five per cent.⁴⁵ Florida's educators, nonetheless, had little room for complaint. As early as 1869, Sears had written to Superintendent Chase pointing out that the "proper distributive share of Florida would be about \$2,000 per annum; but as you are farther advanced than some of the other Southern States, I am willing to give Florida, by way of anticipation, more than double her share for this year."⁴⁶ In October 1877, Sears wrote to W. P. Haisley, Florida's newly-appointed superintendent of public instruction, to ask him if the state could make it through the year without aid, in view of the reduction of fund contributions by forty per cent. In his letter Sears reminded Haisley that "Florida has heretofore received much more than its share of the Fund."⁴⁷

42. *Ibid.*, VI, 7.

43. *Proceedings*, I, 206.

44. *Ibid.*, II, 123.

45. *Ibid.*

46. "Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction," January 3, 1870, p. 66, in *Florida Senate Journal*, 1870, Appendix.

47. "Biennial Report of the Superintendent Public Instruction, for the

In Florida, as in the other southern states, the bulk of Peabody grants went to schools in more urban centers. The five Florida towns receiving the most aid during Reconstruction were St. Augustine, Key West, Tallahassee, Jacksonville, and Gainesville. Ocala, Apalachicola, Lake City, Quincy, Madison, and Pensacola also received small grants. In the larger communities, most of the money went to white schools. In 1868-1869, the only Peabody aid provided to Negro education in Florida consisted of \$200 for an Apalachicola school with 100 pupils. During 1869-1870 black schools in Key West, Gainesville, Ocala, and Apalachicola received some help. In Gainesville a school with 200 black pupils received \$300, while a similar amount went to the East Florida Seminary, a state-supported institution whose white student body numbered only about 100. Black schools in Ocala and Apalachicola each reported enrollments of 100 and received grants of \$200, two-thirds the amount allotted to white schools with equal enrollments.⁴⁸

In June 1872, Sears reported contributions to black schools in St. Augustine, Tallahassee, Gainesville, Key West, Monticello, Pensacola, Madison, Ocala, and Apalachicola.⁴⁹ After that year it is not possible to identify black institutions receiving Peabody aid, as extant records show only community totals. In the main, however, the bulk of disbursements from the fund continued to be spent on education for white children.

Although one Tallahassee newspaper referred to Peabody monetary aid for 1875 as a "mere pittance," it nonetheless constituted a significant contribution to public education in Florida.⁵⁰ In 1870, for example, Peabody spending equalled 11.3 per cent of public spending on education in the state.⁵¹ In those counties receiving substantial grants, the Peabody fund often provided as much as twenty-five per cent of the annual school budget. During the 1871-1872 school year in Alachua County, the fund paid \$1,000 of the estimated \$6,000 expenses.⁵²

School Years 1876-7 and 1878," December 31, 1878, p. 178, in Florida *Senate Journal*, 1879, Appendix.

48. *Proceedings*, I, 208, 253-56.

49. *Ibid.*, 306-10.

50. *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 19, 1876.

51. *Proceedings*, II, 123; *Ninth Census, 1870, Population*, I, 462.

52. "Minutes of the Board of Public Instruction," II, 58, Alachua County Board of Public Instruction, Gainesville, Florida.

In St. Johns County during 1875-1876, of school operating expenses totalling \$4,325, the Peabody fund contributed \$1,000.⁵³

Florida's educational spokesmen realized that the fund constituted a vital supplement to the state's resources. State Superintendent of Public Instruction Charles Beecher, in his 1872 report, pointed out that "aid derived from the Peabody Fund is of peculiar value, because it is so distributed as to sustain schools for about ten months in places where they become models of what good schools ought to be."⁵⁴ The chairman of the Jacksonville Board of Education wrote, in January 1873, that "for success [in education] we are dependent, in a large measure, on the aid received from the Peabody Fund."⁵⁵

Through its support, the Peabody fund made many contributions to education in Florida and the South. It encouraged the newly-emerging state systems of education, emphasized the importance of the primary school as the base of the educational pyramid, and helped to establish models—in urban centers—of good primary schools. It is these contributions which led historians R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence Cremin to write: "The services of the Peabody Fund . . . cannot be over-estimated. Without its support it is doubtful that the South would have achieved even the limited advance evidenced by the turn of the century."⁵⁶

Despite the fund's contributions to southern education, such an interpretation exaggerates the importance of the fund and fails to recognize the vitality of the South in the development of its own post-Civil War education. It also fails to come to grips with the second-class support given black schools or the conservatism of Barnas Sears and the board of trustees in racial matters. Someone once described Sears as "one of the veriest doughfaces in the whole Southern region." Although his successor as general agent, J. L. M. Curry, took exception to this description, there can be little doubt that Sears reflected the

53. "Minutes and Letters of the Board of Public Instruction, 1875-79," p. 14, St. Johns County Board of Public Instruction, St. Augustine, Florida.

54. "Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Of the State of Florida, for the Year ending Sept. 30, 1872," p. 16, in *Florida Senate Journal*, 1873, Appendix.

55. *Proceedings*, I, 373.

56. R. Freeman Butts and Lawrence A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture* (New York, 1953), 412.

conservative viewpoint in the South.⁵⁷ As a result, the Peabody fund's most significant contribution to education in Florida may well have been its support and encouragement of the state's racially separate and unequal school system.

57. Curry, *Brief Sketch*, 60; *Tallahassee Sentinel*, August 19, 1876.